

The Sepoy Rebellion Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
What caused the Sepoy Rebellion?

Materials:

- Copies of Documents A-E
- Copies of Guiding Questions

Note: This lesson is intended for multiple class periods. Prior to this lesson, students should be familiar with India's colonial history and the establishment of the British East India Company.

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introduction: Use the PowerPoint presentation to establish background information on the Sepoy Rebellion and introduce the day's Central Historical Question.
 - a. Slide 2: British Colonial India 1765-1805. *During the first half of the 19th century, Britain ruled large parts of India through its British East India Company. This was a huge private trading company with governmental powers, such as the power to tax, raise armies, reach agreements with local Indian princes, and take over some regions directly.* Note: The British territory is colored pink on the map.
 - b. Slide 3: Mughal Empire. *India was a huge rural society with millions of poor peasants. A large minority of them were Muslims. The Muslim Mughal emperors once ruled much of India, but they had lost most of their power by the early 1800s. Most Indians were Hindus. They were divided into castes – hierarchical social classes based on beliefs of purity and pollution that each person was born into. The Brahmin caste was the highest one.*
 - c. Slide 4-5: The British East India Company & British Colonial India 1837-1857. *The number of British officials in India was small. However, during the first half of the 19th century, Britain extended its control of the country. In many regions, the East India Company relied on traditional princes and other rulers. In some regions, the Company took direct control, in part to tax land more effectively. Its taxing powers often angered both poor peasants and wealthy aristocratic landowners.*
 - d. Slide 6: Sepoys: Indian Soldiers. *The sepoys were Indian soldiers serving in the British East India Company's armies. By the 1850s, there were nearly 300,000 sepoys serving in the Company's army.* Note: The British territory is colored pink on the map.
 - e. Slide 7: Rebellion of 1857. *In 1857, rumors spread that new rifle cartridges were greased with cow and pig fat. Using them would violate both Muslim and Hindu rules. On May 10th 1857, some sepoys violently rebelled,*

killing English residents in Meerut in north India. They then marched to Delhi to appeal to the last Mughal emperor to lead them. This was the start of the Sepoy Rebellion.

- f. Slide 8: Spread of the Rebellion. *The Sepoy Rebellion spread to many separate areas in northern India. The sepoys and the British both committed terrible atrocities. Certain incidents in which British women and children were slaughtered aroused enormous outrage in England. British soldiers also fought with fury and ruthless violence. In addition to soldiers, members of the rebellion included some Indian nobility, rural landowners, and peasants. Yet many Indians sided with the British, and not all regions of India took part in the uprising. The uprising was fully suppressed by the middle of 1858. As a result of the rebellion, Britain took over the East India Company's colonies. Note: In this map, the green states remained neutral. The lighter blue states sided with the British. The rebels were active in various ways in the black, darker blue and tan states.*
 - g. Slides 9-10: British Perspective. *Explain to students that for a long time, people learned of the Sepoy Rebellion mainly from British accounts of it. Historians have offered differing interpretations of the uprising, focusing on different causes and perspectives.*
 - h. Slide 10: Central Historical Question. *In this lesson, students will be learning about both British and Indian views of the uprising and evaluating different interpretations of it. The students' main task will be to answer the lesson's Central Historical Question: What caused the Sepoy Rebellion?*
2. Introduce/Review skills of sourcing and corroboration.
- a. If necessary, use Historical Thinking posters to review the skills of sourcing and corroboration.
 - b. Point out that historians make claims based upon evidence often found in historical documents. In order to gather credible evidence, historians evaluate the reliability, or trustworthiness, of different historical sources. They often do this by considering the point of view and purpose of different historical actors and by comparing how different sources portray historical events.
 - c. Explain to students that they will work on sourcing and corroborating five documents on the Sepoy Rebellion. Students will develop a claim addressing the lesson's central question. By carefully considering the varying points of view of these sources, they will seek to understand an historical event by evaluating contrasting and complementing accounts of it in the evidence.
3. Hand out Documents A and B.
- a. Explain that first the class will be reading two documents from the British perspective.
 - b. Have students review the Guiding Questions.

- c. In pairs, students read each document and answer the Guiding Questions.
 - d. As a whole class, share out and discuss responses.
 4. Hand out Documents C and D.
 - a. Explain to students that they will now read two documents written by Indians.
 - b. Have students read Document C and answer the Guiding Questions.
 - c. As a whole class, share out and discuss responses.
 - d. Have students read Document D and answer the Guiding Questions.
 - e. As a whole class, share out and discuss responses.
 5. Hand out Document E.
 - a. Explain to students that they will now read a final document, an excerpt from an article written by a historian.
 - b. Ask students to consider how this final document compares to the others while they read the document.
 - c. Have students read Document E and answer the Guiding Questions.
 6. Final Discussion
 - a. What caused the Sepoy Rebellion?
 - b. What events do think were the most significant in causing the rebellion?
 - c. Which of these documents do you think provides the most reliable information regarding the rebellion? Why?
 - d. What perspective are we missing from this set of documents? Why might there be few accounts from this perspective? Why might an account from this perspective be valuable?
If students struggle to answer this, raise the question of whether this set of documents includes an account written by an Indian rebel. Explain that the British violently retaliated against entire villages believed to have supported the rebellion and that India was a colony of Britain for nearly 90 years after the end of the rebellion. It would have been difficult, even dangerous, for rebels to tell the history of uprising from their perspective.
 7. Final Claim. Using arguments and evidence from Documents A-E, write a final claim regarding the question: What caused the Sepoy Rebellion?
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Citations:

Document A

S.R Gardiner, *English History for Schools: B.C. 55—A.D. 1880*, New York: Holt, 1881, p. 435.

Document B

Sir Colin Campbell, *Narrative of the Indian Revolt from Its Outbreak to the Capture of Lucknow*, G. Vickers, 1858, p. 2.

Document C

Sita Ram, *From Sepoy to Subedar: Being the Life Adventures of Subedar Sita Ram, A Native Officer in the Bengal Army, Written and Related by Himself*, Vikas Publications, p.162, 164-166.

Document D

Sayyid Ahmed Khan, *The Causes of the Indian Revolt*. Medical Hall Press, 1873. Retrieved from <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mea/mealac/pritchett/00urdu/asbab/translation1873.html>?

Document E

Joseph Coohill, "Indian Voices from the 1857 Rebellion," *History Today*, May, 2007, pp. 48-54.

Document A: Gardiner's *English History*

Samuel Rawson Gardiner (1829-1902) was an English historian and a professor of history at King's College in London. He wrote several books on English history. The excerpt below comes from a book he wrote for young students.

The Indian Mutiny of 1857

The religion of the Hindus, who form a great part of the natives in India, teaches many things which seem very strange to Englishmen. Among other things they are taught that they will be **defiled** if they eat any part of a cow. By this defilement they will meet with much **contempt** from their fellows, and will suffer much after death in another world. The bulk of the army in India was composed of Hindus.

It happened that an improved rifle had lately been invented for the use of the soldiers, and that the **cartridges** used in this rifle needed to be greased so they could be rammed down easily into the barrel. The men believed that the grease was made of the fat of cows, though this was not really the case. There was, therefore, much suspicion and angry feeling among the native soldiers, and when ignorant men are suspicious and angry they are likely to break out into deeds of unreasoning **fury**.

Source: Gardiner's *English History for Schools*, an English textbook edited for American students, 1881.

Vocabulary

defiled: made dirty, spoiled, ruined

contempt: disrespect

cartridge: ammunition for a gun or rifle

fury: extreme anger

Document B: Sir Colin Campbell (Modified)

Sir Colin Campbell took charge of British forces during the uprising. In this passage from his book on the uprising, he first discusses the Hindu sepoys. These soldiers included members of various castes, and a sizable number of them were Brahmins, the highest caste.

Any considerable offence offered to [the Brahmins] . . . might seriously endanger the **fidelity** of the native troops; and there seems to be little doubt that offence has been given. **Injudicious** attempts to convert sepoys to Christianity have been made, and [the sepoys believed] that they were to be converted by **compulsion**. . . .

At the same time it is impossible to dissociate the revolt and the [removal] of the Muslim king of **Oudh**.

The province of Oudh had always maintained its independence. . . . But at length the system of government became too bad to be tolerated; the court was a mere hot bed of oppression, intrigue, and sensuality; and the British took control of Oudh.

It has never been disputed that this was a merciful change for the people of Oudh; but the people are not always governed by reason. Prejudices – religious, national and social – have paramount influence even in a civilized country; this is even more true in a region sunk into barbarism.

Source: *Sir Colin Campbell*, Narrative of the Indian Revolt from Its Outbreak to the Capture of Lucknow, 1858.

Vocabulary

fidelity: loyalty, faithfulness

injudicious: unwise, lacking in judgment

compulsion: act of compelling or forcing

Oudh: Region in northern India

fanaticism: wild or extreme devotion or enthusiasm, as with regard to religion or politics

Document C: Sita Ram

Sita Ram was a sepoy who remained loyal to the British. Yet even he had his "doubts" about them. The following is an excerpt from memoirs he wrote sometime in the 1860s about the rebellion.

It chanced that about this time the English Government sent parties of men from each regiment to different garrisons for instruction in the use of the new rifle. These men performed the new drill for some time until a report got about, by some means or other, that the cartridges used for these new rifles were greased with the fat of cows and pigs. The men from our regiment wrote to others in the regiment telling them of this, and there was soon excitement in every regiment.

Some men pointed out that in forty years of service nothing had ever been done by the English Government to insult their religion, but as I have already mentioned the sepoys' minds had been inflamed by the seizure of Oudh. Interested parties were quick to point out that the great aim of the English was to turn us all into Christians and they had therefore introduced the cartridge in order to bring this about, since both Muslims and Hindus would be defiled by using it. . . .

[The Proclamation of the King of Delhi] stated that the English Government intended to make all Brahmins into Christians, which had in fact been proved correct, and in proof of it one hundred ministers were about to be stationed in Oudh. Caste was going to be broken by forcing everyone to eat beef or pork. . . .

I had never known the English to interfere with our religion or our caste in all the years since I had been a soldier, but I was nevertheless filled with doubt. . . . I had also remarked the increase in Missionaries during recent years, who stood up in the streets of our cities and told the people that their cherished religion was all false, and who exhorted them to become Christians.

Source: *Sita Ram*, From Sepoy to Subedar: Being the Life Adventures of Subedar Sita Ram, A Native Officer in the Bengal Army, Written and Related by Himself.

Document D: Sayyid Ahmed Khan

Sayyid Ahmed Khan was a Muslim noble and scholar who worked as a jurist for the British East India Company. At the time of the uprising, he was loyal to the British. Later, he came to blame several British policies and mistakes for the uprising. He thought that the British decision not to include Indians in the Legislative Council, a British government organization in charge of India, was particularly harmful. He explained his views in a book he first published in 1858 in Urdu. The book was translated into English in an edition published in 1873. This passage is from the English translation.

The evils which resulted to India from the non-admission of natives into the Legislative Council of India were various. . . . The people had no means of protesting against what they might feel to be a foolish measure. . . . Whatever law was passed was **misconstrued** by men who had no share in the framing of it. At length the **Hindustanis** fell into the habit of thinking that all the laws were passed with a view to degrade and ruin them. . . . Although the intentions of Government were excellent, there was no man who could convince the people of it; no one was at hand to correct the errors which [the government] had adopted. And why? Because there was not one of their own number among the members of the Legislative Council. Had there been, these evils that had happened to us, would have been averted.

There is not the smallest doubt that all men whether ignorant or well-informed, whether high or low, felt a firm conviction that the English Government was bent on interfering with their religion and with their old established customs. They believed that Government intended to force the Christian Religion and foreign customs upon Hindu and Muslim alike.

Source: Sayyid Ahmed Khan, *The Causes of the Indian Revolt*. Medical Hall Press, 1873.

Vocabulary

misconstrued: misunderstood.

Hindustanis: people of Hind area of Northern India, along the plain of the Ganges River.

Document E: Joseph Coohill

Joseph Coohill is a historian and university professor at Duquesne University. The passage below is from an article he wrote in 2007 for the magazine History Today.

Sepoys in the East India Company army had seen their pay (and therefore their status) decline in recent years, and many felt that the new officers serving in the Company army . . . did not have the same respect and sympathy for sepoys as the previous generation of Company officers. Lord Dalhousie, Governor General of India, introduced the so-called Doctrine of Lapse, a policy which allowed the East India Company to extend its control into Indian territory when a native ruler died. . . . The Company applied the Doctrine to take over the town of Oudh. Indians considered this to be a final outrage of British conquest. Oudh was such a rich and historic part of India that this seizure was seen as a cultural insult. The outbreak of hostilities in the army would not have spread so quickly or gained much-needed local support if the sepoys' **grievances** had not been echoed by **discontent** in many parts of India, both rural and urban.

Source: Joseph Coohill, "Indian Voices from the 1857 Rebellion," History Today, 2007.

Vocabulary

grievances: complaints
discontent: unhappiness

Sepoy Rebellion Guiding Questions

Document A: Gardiner's History

- 1) What kind of document is this? When was it written?
- 2) Who was the intended audience of this document?
- 3) What are the author's main claims about what caused the Sepoy Rebellion?
- 4) Do you think this is a trustworthy document? Why or why not?

Document B: Colin Campbell

- 1) Who is Campbell? When was the document written?
- 2) What are Campbell's two main claims about what caused the Sepoy Rebellion?
- 3) According to Campbell, why did the British take control of Oudh?
- 4) How does Campbell describe the residents of Oudh?
- 5) Do you think this is a trustworthy document? Why or why not?

Document C: Sita Ram

- 1) Who is Sita Ram? When was the document written?

- 2) What are Sita Ram's main claims about what caused the Sepoy Rebellion?

- 3) Do you think this is a trustworthy document? Why or why not?

- 4) How do Sita Ram's arguments compare to those in Document A and Document B?

Document D: Sayyid Ahmed Khan

- 1) Who is Khan? When was the document written?

- 2) What are Kahn's main claims about what caused the Sepoy Rebellion?

- 3) Do you think this is a trustworthy document? Why or why not?

Document E: Coohill's History

- 1) Who is Coohill? When was the document written?

- 2) Coohill wrote, "Indians considered this to be a final outrage of British conquest." What do you think he meant?

- 3) What additional information about the causes of the Sepoy Rebellion does this document provide?

- 4) Do you think this is a trustworthy document? Why or why not?

Sepoy Rebellion Final Claim

Using arguments and evidence from Documents A-E, make a final claim to answer the question: *What caused the Sepoy Rebellion?*